

BOOMER OF THE BRONX

Portrait of President Lyons, whose mission it is to prove that his borough deserves cheers (and not Bronx cheers).

nary for the Bronx, Mr. Lyons executes most of the publicity coups by timing them with the news of the day.

When Hitler annexed the Czecho-Slovak Sudetenland, for example, he decided to satirize the land grab with an "Anschluss" of his own. Taking advantage of the fact that Marble Hill, Manhattan's northernmost outpost, is geographically in the Bronx, he assumed the title of "Bronxfuehrer" and claimed the territory for his borough on the grounds that the two peoples were united by common ties of tradition, language and culture. While photo-flash bulbs popped, he planted the Bronx flag on the highest spot he could find in Marble Hill and proclaimed it part of the Third Bronx.

ORIGINALLY, Mr. Lyons hadn't the slightest intention of annexing the forty-two-acre "Sudetenland" on the Harlem Ship Canal. And when irate Marble Hillians began storming City Hall and bombarding Albany with letters of protest, he came to regret that he had ever started the "putsch." The whole controversy germinated in an innocent postcard written to him by a high-school student who wanted to know where Manhattan ended and the Bronx began. A reporter, who happened to see the card, dropped the words "Marble Hill" and "Anschluss" into the Borough President's mental processes and he was off.

When a former Canadian fur trapper was arrested several months ago for setting traps in Pelham Bay Park, Mr. Lyons, visualizing headlines, wrote to Park Commissioner Moses, proposing the establishment of a Bronx Bay Company to exploit mink and weasel preserves in the borough as a new source of revenue to the city. When the Giant Krubi, perhaps the foulest-smelling as well as the largest flower in the world, went on exhibition last Summer at the Bronx Botanical Garden, he designated it as the official flower of the Bronx.

"It may not smell so sweet," he explained, "but it's healthy and grows fast—just like the Bronx." Then he managed

to forget the Giant Krubi, just as he managed to forget Marble Hill, the Hussar and the fur-bearing animal kingdom.

Fifty years old, Mr. Lyons, like Lincoln, was born on Feb. 12. Affable, tall, broad-shouldered and gray at the temples, he is not only the most playful of all five Borough Presidents but the most fastidious dresser. His two main vices seem to be cigarettes, which he smokes in chain fashion, and rainbow-hued cravats, for which he pays \$6.50 each. In what he calls his "active wardrobe" are fifty of the aforementioned cravats, ten suits (\$100 each and up), six hats (\$20 each) and twelve pairs of goatskin shoes (\$30 a pair). Except for his ties he dresses on the conservative side.

As a young man he was a district captain for several years at the North End Democratic Club in the Bronx and won several trophies as an oarsman, but until 1933, when he was nominated for the Borough Presidency, his life, he readily admits, was not particularly exciting. Born on Leroy Street in Manhattan, also Jimmy Walker's birthplace, he and his family—his father was in the produce business—moved to the High Bridge section of the Bronx.

MR. LYONS has never left the borough since. In 1917 he married Miss Gertrude O'Brien of Melrose, daughter of James F. O'Brien, first Sheriff of Bronx County. They have three children—William J., 13 years old, in high school; Gertrude Ann, 19, a student at New Rochelle College, and James J. Jr., a member of the first-year class at Harvard Law School.

Unlike his children, Mr. Lyons never got beyond the eighth grade in his formal schooling. When he was graduated from P. S. 11 in 1903, he went to work as a \$3-a-week office boy for the leather company he later left as a \$25,000-a-year salesman. His meager schooling explains perhaps his passionate interest in education and culture and provides a clue to some of his extra-political exploits in behalf of the Bronx.

Three years (Continued on Page 13)

Bronx Borough President James J. Lyons: "Public office is a business."

By HENRY R. LIEBERMAN

SUNDAY, as any one associated with newspapers will attest, is usually not a "heavy" day for news. Thus, on a quiet Sunday recently, Borough President James J. Lyons of the Bronx, seeing an opportunity to link those two magic names in print again, submitted press handouts on his latest extrapolitical activity to all the metropolitan journals.

He reminded city editors that the British frigate Hussar, which sank off Point Morris in the Bronx in pre-Revolutionary days with an untold fortune of gold aboard, had never been salvaged. Magnanimously, he offered 20 per cent of the bullion to any enterprising soul who would undertake to recover it, reserving 80 per cent for the Bronx poor.

Once the offer got into the newspapers, Mr. Lyons promptly proceeded to forget the matter. As chief drum-beater for the Bronx, he had struck another blow in his relentless campaign to make his borough the best-known community in America.

BACK in 1931, in the depths of the Great Depression, Mr. Lyons was a million-dollar-a-year leather salesman. As sales manager of a large company, he preached to his men the gospel that, with the proper approach, electric fans could be sold to Eskimos and oil burners to cannibals, depression or no depression. To prove his point he himself went out and sold enough leather to cover 4,000,000 pairs of women's feet. The type of leather he sold had gone out with the Gibson girl, but he had holes punched in it and, so, started a new style trend.

Today, as Borough President of the Bronx, Mr. Lyons, who had never before held political office, is using the same kind of sales tactics to "sell" the Bronx as a combination of old Byzantium, Biarritz and the Swiss Alps. As he views the situation, there is no basic difference between the Bronx and shoe leather. Now, as in the old days, his method is to break down sales resistance by repeatedly hammering home the fine points of his product and keeping it constantly before the public.

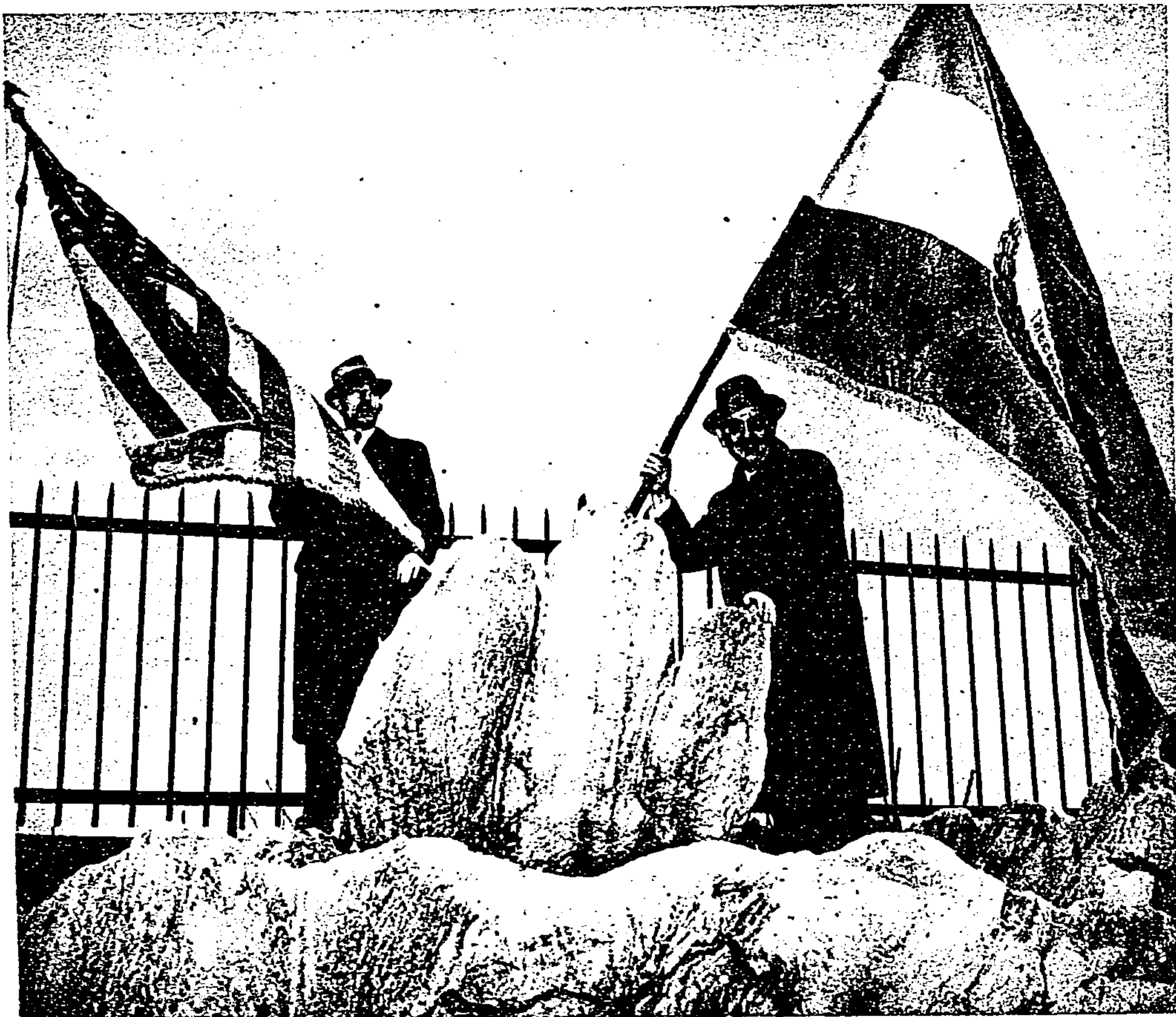
Before Mr. Lyons became Borough

President in 1933, the Bronx was known principally through the Bronx cocktail, a concoction of gin and orange juice, and the Bronx cheer, an emphatic labial form of disapprobation. As a result of years of cruel jibes at the borough's expense by vaudeville comics, the mere mention of its name became enough to evoke mysterious chuckles and bring to mind the distorted picture of a far-off province, tawdry tenements, desolate bluffs, chopped chicken livers and subway trains fighting their way to the surface for air.

SINCE taking office, Mr. Lyons—"Pappy" to the newspaper men attached to the Bronx County Building, his headquarters—has fought to break down these negative stereotypes with high-tone slogans, voluminous press releases and long panegyrics on the neglected virtues of the Bronx. He has tried to sustain this civic sales-promotion campaign by bizarre flights into humor and fantasy. He measures its success by his mounting number of scrapbooks, now totaling fifty.

He has floated "Bronx, preferred" not only through the newspapers but on the radio and at Board of Estimate meetings, civic celebrations and political dinners. One of his first official acts as Borough President was to invest the Bronx with the title of "borough of universities, cultural influences, comfortable dwellings, healthful climate and low tax rate." Years later, when he made the happy discovery that the Bronx cheer had flourished in Italy centuries ago under the name of "pernacchia," he issued a proclamation restoring the "cheer" to Mussolini, with the suggestion that Il Duce give it to Hitler.

As press agent extraordi-



When Manhattan's Marble Hill "Sudetenland" was annexed by "Bronxfuehrer" Lyons (right).

The New York Times

Published: March 24, 1940
Copyright © The New York Times

Times Wide World

BOOMER OF THE BRONX



Times Wide World

An incident in the Bronx "Kulturkampf"—Borough President Lyons presenting a mock diploma to former Deputy Mayor Curran.

(Continued from Page 8)
ago, at the height of his Bronx Kulturkampf, he eagerly backed a movement for a borough opera company. The company was to give seven performances, but so few attended the first performance that the last six had to be shifted to Manhattan.

UNABLE to do anything with the opera, he turned to grammar. Rebuked once by that grammatical purist, Chief Magistrate Henry H. Curran (then Deputy Mayor), for using "contact" as a verb, he set up a mock "Curran University" and began exposing the grammatical errors of other local administrators. Coming across a safety sign reading "You only live once," he protested to Police Commissioner Lewis J. Valentine that the sign should have read "You live only once."

Mr. Valentine apologized for the error, but that was little solace to Mr. Lyons, who was lying in ambush for Mr. Curran. Finally the scholarly Mr. Curran slipped. Writing a magazine article on humor and politics, he made the statement: "Politics are even more transitory than life." Mr. Lyons immediately sent Mr. Curran the first lesson of a correspondence school grammar course on agreement between nouns and verbs. (According to Webster's, "politics" may be either singular or plural.)

Notwithstanding his extrapolitical activities, Mr. Lyons works long and hard at the serious side

of his job. He hasn't had a vacation in fifteen years. But, though he covers eight to ten meetings every night and can't find time to get to his wife's parties, he never misses a Sunday morning mass at St. Nicholas of Tolentine Roman Catholic Church.

Mr. Lyons's selection by the Bronx Democratic organization as its candidate for Borough President in 1933 came as a complete surprise not only to the public but to Mr. Lyons himself. At that time he was president of the Bronx Grand Jurors Association.

One day, as he tells the story, he received a telephone call from Edward J. Flynn, Bronx Democratic leader, who offered him the nomination.

"I don't know," the stunned leather man replied. "I've got a good job and, besides, I've never been in politics."

MR. FLYNN, according to Mr. Lyons, said that that didn't matter because the party wanted a business man for the office. Still stunned, the chosen one asked for a few days to think it over. At the appointed time he telephoned Mr. Flynn to give him an affirmative answer, but the Democratic leader was busy and would Mr. Lyons mind calling back?

"I thought that was the end," the Borough President recalls, "but when I phoned back, the offer was still open. So I took it. Then I picked up a World Almanac to find out what was the salary of a Borough President."

The salary was \$15,000.

After six years as Borough President—he first took office in 1934 and was re-elected in 1937—Mr. Lyons feels that business is an excellent preparatory school for politics. "Public office," he argues, "is a business. The City of New York is one of the largest corporations in the world, and its problems are like those of any other company. In politics you have to consider the human element more than in business, but in both you must strive for maximum efficiency

and make sure that there's more coming in than going out."

As a legislator, Mr. Lyons is best known for the Lyons Non-Resident Bill, a law designed to keep out-of-towners off the city payroll. But politically, he can best be described as a Roosevelt Democrat.

UNTIL Councilman John J. Cashmore was selected to complete the unfinished term of the late Borough President Raymond V. Ingersoll of Brooklyn, Mr. Lyons constituted a one-man minority in the Board of Estimate. A lone Democrat, surrounded by La Guardia Fusionists, he harassed the majority continually, but only from a sense of duty.

"I've got nothing against the La Guardia Administration," he explains. "I like and admire Mayor La Guardia and have supported him 17,473 times out of a possible 17,579 in the board, which makes 99.3-5 per cent of the time. I've used some of the things Fiorello has said about me in my campaign literature. But, after all, they tell me that over in England, when they can't get an Opposition in Parliament, the

Crown hires a heckler to keep the government on its toes."

Thus, for example, Mr. Lyons has often teased the Mayor for leaving New York to go off on speech-making tours. Last year, while Mr. La Guardia was out of town, the Bronx oppositionist staged a mock commencement in the Board of Estimate, giving the Mayor an "honorary Doctor of Science degree, in absentia, for his skillful directing of Board of Estimate meetings by remote control."

During the recent cigarette-tax controversy Mr. Lyons, a cigarette smoker, demanded that a similar tax be imposed on cigar and pipe smokers. "It's not fair," he objected. "The Mayor, who smokes five-cent stinkers and a pipe, ought to pay this tax, too." When North Beach airport was under construction the Borough President criticized the Mayor for spending too much money, but when the magnificent airport was completed he pushed through a resolution naming it La Guardia Field. It was his way of showing there were no hard feelings.

For all his heckling, Mr. Lyons is on friendly terms with all the

principal Fusionists. There is one notable exception—Newbold Morris, President of the City Council, who once threatened to "bounce" him out of the Bronx. "Newbold and I just don't understand each other," is the way Mr. Lyons puts it.

At a board meeting some time ago Mr. Lyons, in a generous mood, voted for a \$1,600 piano for Queens College. "Let 'em say they have the most expensive piano in the city," he said.

"Why not?" Mr. Morris snarled. "We already have a very expensive horn in the Bronx."

MR. LYONS has suffered for the Bronx. He was greeted in Marble Hill with cacophonous catcalls. When he brought up the sinking of the Hussar, he was besieged by salvagers who wanted him to finance the recovery of the gold that went down with it. Each time he gets his name in the newspapers he is accused anew of being a publicity seeker. But the charges come only from those who fail to understand his passionate desire to give the Bronx a place in the sun.